
Response to “Reaction or Prescription” and “Charism and Office”

Carol Myers

These two papers raise significant issues and questions that are before the church. I'll comment on four areas: the nature of church order, language, the ministry of the baptized, and the needs of the church.

First, the church's order has been shaped and formed by the church over centuries. It represents the wisdom of those who have preceded us and the working of the Holy Spirit in the councils of the church. It would be at our peril that we set it aside as a relic of the past. We need to be on guard, lest pride and contemporary arrogance blind us and cause us to stumble. The order, albeit without proof texting, does express our theology and covenant for the way we live together. It provides the structure for the church to organize itself and, thereby, serve God's purposes in the world. Our order and procedures also protect the church from manipulation and inappropriate control. Often those most frustrated by order are those whose attempts to manipulate and control are thwarted by orderly process. Our structures protect us from improper manipulation.

Second, those of us who serve the church in the area of its order are culpable for having allowed the church to use language that does not accurately describe who we are. We have commonly used somewhat sloppy and careless language. We've picked up language that belongs to other traditions, and, it is true that language shapes perception. That has happened to us. We confuse ourselves when we talk about “clergy” and “laity.” Those terms are appropriate in episcopal systems. We, however, do not have an episcopal system. We have offices: as you know, deacon, elder, minister of Word and sacrament, and professor of theology. We have offices and the baptized people of God—the members of our churches. Talk of clergy and laity dismisses and minimizes two of our offices. We have a treasure in the offices of deacon and elder. Our lack of care in the use of language has contributed to obscuring this asset. These offices are a treasure we are only beginning to appreciate, and a treasure still largely untapped.

Third is the ministry of the baptized. As the *Liturgy* says: “By the Holy Spirit all who believe and are baptized receive a ministry to witness to Jesus as Savior and Lord, and to love and serve those with whom they live and work.” All the baptized have a ministry to witness and to serve, to be the church in and for the world. Every one of us is called to serve the reign of God, to further the purposes of Christ's kingdom, to be Christ's agents, to bring about Christ's rule of peace and justice. This is ministry. It belongs to every person who is called

“Christian.”

The recent emphasis on mission and ministry has led to an increased awareness that ministry does belong to the whole people of God. Ministry is the work of the baptized—the people of God. Ministry is not the sole responsibility of those ordained to office—elders, deacons, and ministers. The offices, in the assemblies—consistories, classes, synods—have a particular responsibility for governance. The church is well served by keeping a clear distinction between ordained office and ministry within the church. While all ordained persons serve in a ministry, not all ministries need be ordained. The *Book of Church Order* amendments before the church this year encourage the recognition of ministry, unburdened by governance. Let’s take care not to confuse “ministry” with “office.”

We are called to minister to the world, not to the church. Ideally, every Christian would be commissioned to a form of ministry for (“all . . . receive a ministry”). The *Liturgy* already provides orders for congregations to commission people to ministry, both vocational and volunteer. Incidentally, it is the goal of the catechumenate, a process for accompanying people on the journey to faith, to enable each person to identify his or her own ministry in daily life. This is in daily life, not necessarily in the church. We are called to imitate Christ, to take on the image of Christ, and to reflect Christ’s image to the world. We are not called to identify persons who are then charged to reproduce themselves.

For millennia, faithful followers of Christ have served Jesus in the church and in the world. My grandmothers didn’t need special ministry designations to follow their own callings. They both served extensively and with a strong sense of vocation. One danger of confusing ministry and office is that people in the pews could get the idea that ministry belongs to those who have been so set apart—not to the whole people of God. And if one is just a “regular member,” well, leave ministry to the superstars. We need to be cautious about professionalizing “ministry.”

Finally, we consider the needs of the church. Theological depth is needed, both for those within the church who are being equipped to serve in the world and for the position and role of the church in the wider community. When regard for all institutions is at a low ebb, it hardly seems the time to lower standards for church leadership. Other professions are increasing credentials, raising the bar. We all appreciate the role of paralegals and physicians’ assistants, but we don’t want them representing us in court or performing our surgery. At a Hope College lecture last year, Stanley Hauerwas asked whether the role of ordained ministers is still regarded as important. Historically, the role of priest was seen as vital and even more important than that of physician. Now there seems to be a sense that anyone can do whatever ministers do, that what anyone does really doesn’t matter and certainly couldn’t harm anyone. Whether exegeting Scripture, engaging in counseling, or providing spiritual guidance, there is a need for a high level of competence and depth. People who come to our churches can be vulnerable. We’ve all seen, too frequently, the damage

inflicted by those who have good intentions but lack the requisite skills and knowledge.

At best the church struggles to cope effectively with disturbed individuals who are often attracted to our accepting and nonjudgmental communities. This burden is best not left to paraprofessionals and volunteers alone.

The church struggles continually against the temptation to focus inwardly; the presence of ordained ministerial leadership serves as a vital corrective. Christian communities need to maintain an outward focus and embrace diversity. When all of the leadership comes from within, this task becomes a much greater challenge.

For a whole host of reasons, of which these are a few, today's church needs theological depth, especially in its leaders. Our society needs a church that can think and act theologically. We must offer an alternative to the ways of the world, and that alternative can only come from being deeply rooted in our own faith tradition. Therefore, we need to be cautious about adopting a radical, long-term solution to what may be a short-term problem. The demographics are not clear that our shortage of pastors will be a continuing situation. When today's bulging seminary classes move into the church and the current wave of retirements slows, the present need may pass. There are a number of models for addressing a shortage of ministers to serve in rural and urban settings. Cluster parishes, linked parishes, joint parishes with full communion partners, are just a few. Reexamining apostolic models of shared resources is another. I've not heard much being said about such alternatives in the current context.

There is a diversity in the larger body of Christ—and that is a good thing. If we are to remain a Reformed body in a real sense beyond our name, we need to find our way very carefully, searching for ways that honor the tradition which we have received.¹

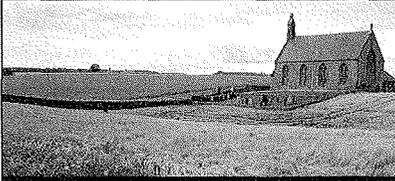
ENDNOTE

¹For further reading: "Career Ministry: Two Cheers for Professional Ministry," by Garret Keizer, *Christian Century*, vol. 119, #9 (April 24–May 1, 2002), 30-33. Garret Keizer has served as a lay vicar in Vermont and asks that we recognize the values of the traditional model before deserting it for other ways.

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